



## **UNDERSTANDING HOW MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS CHANGE THE WAY YOU COMMUNICATE**

### **How mental health problems affect the ability to communicate**

Talking is one of the most important ways of expressing and understanding each other's needs. That's why it is vital for those who care about a person with mental health problems to know the ways in which it negatively affects communication and to learn the skills to counter these effects.

Mental health problems are illnesses, just like diabetes or high blood pressure. However, the symptoms can be physical and / or emotional, and can be reflected in the way the person communicates. For example, doctors and counselors have long known that relationship problems are very common among people with mental health problems. In fact, people with mental health problems first go to a doctor or counselor because they are having problems talking to their loved ones. Mental health problems can make it hard to talk freely and directly to friends and family. Problems in communication can be complicated by feelings of hostility, anger and resentment. These feelings can occur both in the person with mental health problems and in those who care about them.

Friends and family members who understand mental health problems can help their loved one who is suffering. Offering support and encouraging the person with mental health problems to get appropriate diagnosis and treatment can make all the difference in the world. Learning how to counter the toxic effects mental health problems have on the ability to talk with loved ones may also have a positive impact on relationships. This information sheet was created to help people with mental health problems and their loved ones improve their communication skills. This resource outlines the most common communication problems caused by mental health problems and strategies to communicate more openly.

### **Surveys show that these problems are common**

In a recent nationwide survey, fewer than half of the respondents with mental health problems reported that their families and household members understood their condition and were able to help them cope with it. Feeling unable to talk openly about feelings with friends and family can further isolate the person with mental health problems. Many people report that they don't want to go out or do anything and they find excuses to avoid social interactions. Mental health problems also affect self-esteem, which can make the normal ups and downs in a relationship more difficult. Getting appropriate treatment for depression can make a real difference.

Medication and / or psychotherapy can help. Researchers have found that treatment is associated with considerable improvements in the ability to interact socially; however, it is important to note that changes in communication patterns take time - and often other mental health symptoms may get better before the communication problems are resolved.

### **Assessing your communication style**

To improve patterns of communication, it is important to take a moment to think about the ways you typically express thoughts and feelings. When you are talking to your loved ones, do you:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Listen carefully to what the other person is saying and think about what you are going to say before you respond
- \_\_\_\_\_ Acknowledge what you've heard and show that you understand by repeating in your own words what the other person has said
- \_\_\_\_\_ Use humor appropriately to relieve tension
- \_\_\_\_\_ Offer empathy, understanding & support
- \_\_\_\_\_ Express your feelings using "I" statements (for example: "I feel we've grown distant lately and would like to talk about ways we can get closer again")
- \_\_\_\_\_ Honestly share your feelings
- \_\_\_\_\_ Offer ideas for solving problems when asked

Do you fall into any of the following traps when you feel frustrated or upset in a conversation?

- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk behind the person's back
- \_\_\_\_\_ Name call (for example: "You're lazy" or "You're inconsiderate")
- \_\_\_\_\_ Generalize problems, using words like *always* or *never* (for example saying "Why can't you ever show up on time?" when you mean "I'm upset because you're late")
- \_\_\_\_\_ "Kitchen-sink it" In other words, mention all the wrongs you feel have been committed against you. (for example, do you mention doing more housework than your partner during a heated discussion about your spending habits)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Yell or shout

This quick exercise can help you to understand some of your communication patterns. You should work toward eliminating all of the actions on the latter checklist that apply to you, and focus your communication energy on the former checklist of positive actions, which can lead to more constructive communication. Think about your usual communication style as you read the following section.

## **Constructive ways to share your feelings**

Communication can be either destructive - causing hurt and casting blame - or constructive - increasing closeness and understanding. When a person has a mental health problem, it is important to make every effort to find positive, constructive ways to share feelings. Try to be clear on what you say and do during a discussion. Do you react differently when you're speaking to a person with mental health problems? Do you find that you are less patient or less direct about sharing your feelings with that person in order to avoid an argument? The following sections give general guidelines that can help you focus on positive patterns of communication. As you read them, remember that changing your habits is never easy - and you will need time and practice to improve your skills.

### **Communication Do's**

**Set a time and place.** Choose a mutually convenient time and place to discuss one issue only. Consider using a timer to guide the length of your talk. For example, allow one person to talk for 3 minutes without interruption, and then allow the other person to talk for 3 minutes. An egg timer can be useful to avoid distraction while listening or speaking.

**Relax.** Take a few moments to prepare and calm yourself before your discussion. Do your favorite relaxation technique, take a hot bath, or simply take 3 or 4 deep breaths. Stretching or other relaxing movements can also help.

**Find a quiet area.** Make sure your discussion takes place in a peaceful setting where you won't be interrupted or distracted by children, radios or television.

**Target the problem.** Focus on the problem, whatever it is, and not on the other person. Try to visualize the two of you working on the problem (for example, your resentment) together.

**Look at each other.** Establish and maintain relaxed eye contact. This can help each of you connect with the other and it shows that you are both interested and involved in the conversation. Also, pay attention to nonverbal cues like facial expression and tone of voice. Be aware of what you are saying with your body.

**Be direct.** State your feelings and intentions by saying what you are thinking, feeling, and wanting. Here is a great place for humor if it feels appropriate and natural. Don't poke fun at each other or make fun of the mental health problem. Humor should be used to lighten the mood, not darken it.

**Use "I" statements.** Avoid blame or judgment and focus on how you're feeling. Using "I" rather than "you" implies that you have not jumped to any conclusions, that you are open to exploring the possibilities for why you feel the way you do and that you want to resolve the trouble. Use statements such as "I felt hurt and angry when you canceled plans" or "I was hurt when you left early last night".

**Step back if the conversation becomes heated.** Negotiate ahead of time that either of you can call a time out if the conversation starts to escalate into an argument. Whoever has become angry should then excuse him / her self. It's helpful to take a walk, breathe deeply, and do whatever it takes to calm down. Do resume the conversation, but not until you have both calmed down.

**Reflect back what you've heard.** Show that you've been listening by attempting to state the feeling your loved one is trying to express. Similarly, ask the other person to repeat back what you have just said in their own words. Don't conclude your conversation until you are both certain you have understood exactly what was said.

**Brainstorm for solutions.** Be open to creative ideas that may not occur to you normally. Be willing to compromise. Agree on at least one action and / or implementation you can initiate immediately to resolve or relieve the tensions around the issue.

**Offer mutual support.** At the close of your discussion, give each other credit for having taken vital steps toward improving your relationship.

### **Communication Don'ts**

**Don't be discouraged.** Be realistic & understand that one conversation will not end with a complete resolution of all issues.

**Avoid self-blame.** Don't blame yourself : "If I were a more patient husband, my wife wouldn't be so depressed".

**Don't blame each other.** Avoid statements like "You should snap out of it already" or "You aren't trying hard enough".

**Don't yell or shout.** Try to remain calm and talk in a normal tone of voice. If you can keep the discussion calm, it is more likely that you will be able to talk to each other effectively and really hear what is being said.

**Avoid bringing up issues from the past.** For example, if your discussion is about saving money, stick to that topic - don't bring up old issues about who does more housework or who washed the car more often.

**Avoid calling the other person names.** If you are angry, it is important to express your feelings but don't negatively label your loved one as being, for example, "lazy" or "selfish". Instead of helping you to get your point across, name calling will probably offend or insult your loved one, thus causing him / her to tune out everything else you say.

## Straight Talk

Communicating in specific ways is very important to a person with a mental disorder who at times is confused, unable to focus or concentrate, misunderstands or misinterprets. A simple guideline can help:

Person dealing with a mental trauma	Helpful response
Have trouble with reality	Be simple and truthful
Are fearful	Stay calm
Are insecure	Be accepting
Have trouble concentrating	Be brief and repeat
Are over stimulated	Limit what you say: don't force discussion
Become easily agitated	Recognize agitation and allow him or her to escape
Have poor judgment	Not expect rational discussion
Are preoccupied	Get attention first
Are withdrawn	Initiate relevant conversation
Have changing emotions	Disregard them
Believe delusions	Ignore, don't argue
Have little empathy for you	Recognize this as a symptom
Have low self-esteem and motivation	Stay positive